

## **Best Practice Bridges Program**

**Question No. 1 - Describe the practice proposed for recognition, and list its objectives. Detail how the practice is innovative and how it promotes high student achievement.**

The Bridges program fosters positive and uplifting public engagement. This program has influenced the entire town. Teachers orchestrate the Bridges program for the homeless in New York City by coordinating hundreds of adults and students twice a month to collect, sort, and store clothing and food that will be given to the homeless. One Friday each month, for the last eight years they have organized a series of car caravans to New York City to deliver clothing, food and toiletry items as well as to provide opportunities for socialization.

Before each Friday, 7th or 8th grade students from our school volunteer to produce between 300 to 500 bagged lunches for the homeless. Not only do the students prepare a bag with food, they also write on each bag a note of encouragement, or questions or quotes that add a personal touch to their gift. Often they add artistic creativity to the face of the bag. The provision of food, clothing and toiletries for the homeless is a community-supported activity.

Parents and students work together to sort the clothes for the homeless. Whole families make sandwiches and write the messages on the bags. People at sports events and town festivities ask "When is the Wednesday we sort for Bridges?" or "Is it our turn to make the sandwiches?" One long time town resident writes "We leave around 6:30 PM on Friday night and head for the first stop, Center Street, in lower Manhattan. The anxious people are waiting there when the vans arrive. What impressed me so much was the enthusiastic greeting that Mike, Jon, and Kathy give to these people. "Hello! He or she shouts with a friendly smile, how are you? What would you like?" We follow their example and shake hands with everyone. It isn't just going up to give out items in the van. It is making the homeless feel like human beings with dignity and also giving the homeless hope and the knowledge that someone really cares. Then come the poignant good byes we say, while shaking hands and patting backs "Good bye, we'll see you soon, have courage, your life will change." The Bridges program has taught all of us about caring and having concern for our fellow human beings. We have truly created love on the sidewalks of New York."

Students are profoundly affected by this active "hands on" experience. When they read the depression era literature in class, they understand more fully what it must have been like to be homeless then because they know where homelessness is in today's society.

All of us at school contribute and help because the school is so completely committed to the project. For the vast majority of our student/parent community members, who regularly participate in the Bridges program, the dedication to this program is the driving force behind its effectiveness. The fact that the participants remember the homeless with such untiring support is an outstanding example of public engagement, a partnership between school and community.

Sometimes a program such as Bridges is so labor intensive, that it fades as the initial interest lessens. Instead, this program, now in coordination with the school in its eighth year has only grown in its participation in the community and the school. In the recent past, one 8th grade student made his Boy Scout Eagle's Badge project an extension of this homeless program. He collected coats and blankets for the winter to be distributed on a Bridges distribution Friday.

**Question No. 2 – List the specific Core Curriculum Content Standards, including the Cross-Content Workplace Readiness Standards, \*addressed by the practice and describe how the practice addresses those standard(s). Provide an example to substantiate your response.**

“No longer should traditional courses provide the only means of learning and reinforcing; schools need to seek out new avenues for learning.... These avenues will likely include greater interaction with business, industry, local government, and community organizations; volunteer/service activities; - all coordinated with school learning activities.”

Our Bridges Program is an excellent example of this mandate from the Department of Education New Jersey's Core Curriculum Central standards.

- **Health and Physical Education – 2.3 - Drug and alcohol effects**

No classroom instruction can compete with the real physical encounter our students' experience when they meet the homeless in New York City. The message they send is all too real. Although not all students travel to New York City, those that do bring back a message of “what they teach us in school about drugs and alcohol is real!”

- **Language Arts – 3.3, 3.5**

Our students write messages of hope and inspiration in clear, concise sentences fully aware that the people who will receive these messages maybe an educated person or a non-reader. They include visual stimulus that will help the non-reader know this message is positive. This is not an exercise. This is not a “what if”. This message is real and will have a definite impact on a very real homeless person.

- **Science – 5.1 – Interrelationship of Systems**

The outstanding cross curriculum value to our Bridges Program is how much of what they are taught has real everyday value. In science we teach interrelatedness of a system. People are part of a system. They learn first hand how people can have a direct positive impact on others who in turn work to help others. They learn, they believe, that if we are not part of the solution, we are part of the problem.

- **Social Studies – 6.9 – The Environment**

From the sorting of the donated clothing, and company donations of toiletry items, to the visit under the Manhattan bridges, they learn to recycle and believe that we have an impact on our environment and it has one on us. An ex-homeless adult helps with the program. He has an appreciation of his new environment vs. his homeless one. Bridges keeps all material wants in check and brings true understanding to “school work”. What part does geography play in who is homeless? How is it possible for such poverty to exist next to such wealth?

- **Workplace Readiness – 1, 3, 4**

No lecture, no speech, no wise advice speaks so strong as these people we help as to the need for workplace readiness skills – Not just vocation, but avocation and attitude become clearly seriously important skills that need to be taught, need to be learned, and most importantly believed. No single course can equal the real life experience these homeless individuals share with our students. Our students need to use critical problem solving and real decision-making skills in real life situations as they help prepare for the monthly visit, be part of the visit, and help evaluate what the next visit should/could be.

**Question No. 3 - Describe the educational needs of students that the practice addresses. Document the assessment measures used to determine the extent to which the objectives of the practice have been met. Provide assessments and data to show how the practice met these needs.**

Students in today's society often exist in a land of ego-centered high tech media driven isolation. In Bridges we discovered an opportunity that would allow our students and the community to be able to work together in a program that is a true community outreach program. The core standards indicate higher learning experiences are desirable. Putting together concepts that are taught in school, in civics as well as in language arts classes, is a way of showing democracy ideals that can be put to a real test and demonstrate the real values of America.

We are fortunate that this program makes our classroom lessons real. The school has 613 students and over three-quarters of the students have made sandwiches at least once and nearly a quarter makes sandwiches for every Bridges trip. This is a community outreach program where many of the students sort the clothes and the gifts without their parents. Many families do it as an entire family. All of these aspects are important. Support for this program in the community has been broad based and crossed political lines. This year the local Police Benevolent Association awarded its highest honor to the Bridges teacher leader.

Many assessment models could be used to assess the Bridges program. First, an example of a student who chose to use the Bridges program for his Eagle Scout Badge project collected over 180 blankets and coats for the project. There were collection centers in the town church, in the school and in the community center. The sheer number of students who participate in this activity and the volume of articles donated was awe-inspiring.

There isn't one day in the last three years there hasn't been a plastic bag full of clothing, donations of toiletry items or books for this program dropped off at the school. On Wednesday it takes 50 adults, students volunteers five hours to sort through the donations for this program. Students observed as they work in the sorting process demonstrate adult like decisions and work alongside adults as equals. They have to show skills and self-awareness, ability to express themselves; they have to show self-discipline, collaboration skills, and risk taking to make decisions.

The success of this program can be found in the continuing growth and positive community feeling that Bridges generates.

There are few programs that combine school and community in order to make each one better through their combined efforts. Bridges is one of those programs. Its success has a ripple effect on all of us. When extraordinary educators set high standards whole communities put their support behind building a more productive world through effective education. This could not be truer for these people and this community/school program. We are better people, students, staff and community because of Bridges within our school/community.

**Question No. 4 – Describe how you would replicate the practice in another school and/or district.**

The replication of this program demands one or two outstanding dedicated teachers committed to accomplishing an almost impossible task but it can be done. There has to be an organization or a person in the community as well to keep the community an active equal member of this type of program. The key to the success of the program is the communication to the public about its function, purpose and activities. The cost of financing the trips can be financed through money raising activities; while materials are donated from a wide variety of sources not only within the town but from some of the town members' work places. Alternate financing may come from parent or community support groups or fundraising. But most importantly, money is not an issue in replication – it is dedication and time. If you have them, then this program can be easily replicated.